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I. Spring of 65, Under Nero

Marcus Valerius Martialis[1] feels as if his dreams have come true: he has finally arrived in Rome. It is a spring morning on Subura, the market street. He sees clients following senators in large groups, drapers shaking lengths of fabric to entice buyers, lawyers gesturing around the outdoor court. Nero's guards spy silently, the temples throb with worshippers, and merchants cajole the shoppers who elbow toward the food stands.

Martial could buy anything here, from toothbrushes, false teeth, imported fruit, fabric, perfume and exotic birds, to collected works of his favorite poets.

Too bad he hasn't two sestertes to rub together. But he will. Rome offers opportunities; here a clever young man can make a name for himself. He is on his way to visit two other Spaniards who have done exactly that: Marcus Fabius Quintilianus,[2] who teaches rhetoric, and the politician Lucius Annaeus Seneca.[3] They promised his father to help him along. He is quite late.

Martial turns from the market's treasures and follows Subura up toward the grander houses. Reciting the directions he got from a man in the market, he guides himself to an impressive door.

The slave asks, "Who shall I say is calling?"

"Marcus Valerius Martialis from Bilbilis, Spain."

While the poet waits in the cool hall for his host, a young woman appears. He has to look twice to convince himself she's not a moving statue. She is draped in yards of fine wool fabric; her eyes are garishly made up.

"I'm Fabulla," she croons. "A lady. Very rich. Single. And only see how beautiful I am!"

She cozies up to him on the bench.

"Fabulla, that's enough." An older man has appeared. Sternly, he adds, "Martial, you're late."

Fabulla pouts and turns away.

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1 Born about 40 AD in Bilbilis, Spain. Most other information about Martial comes from the poems themselves, as does the material in this paper.

2 Born about 35 AD in Calagurris, Spain.

3 Born about 1 AD in Corduba, Spain.

"Quintilian!" Martial says, "I'm delighted to see you. Sorry, I slept late."

"No profit in sleeping late. Come and meet Seneca." He guides Martial along the hall.

"Quite a comfortable little palace you have," Martial comments.

"I have been successful. Long hours, challenging students."

In the library, piles of scrolls lie open for reading. Seneca leans on a cane near the window. He totters over and embraces Martial.

"We assume you came to Rome to study law with Seneca and rhetoric with me," Quintilian begins.

"I used to be able to help out our young men with the emperor." Seneca says wearily. "I dare not try just now."

"That's fine with me." Martial says. "I learned enough about law at home. Study late, get up early. Complicated arguments. Hard on the voice. I'm a poet."

"A poet? Really? Like Vergil and Ovid?" Seneca asks. "We Spaniards could use an epic poet. Seneca already represents us in tragedy."

Seneca hangs his head modestly.

Martial says, "I only write short poems."

"Epigram?" Seneca's eyebrows rise.

"Epigram. Exactly."

The older men exchange looks of alarm. Quintilian leads his guests to the dining couches.

"Here's one I just thought of," Martial says. He recites:

Bella es, novimus, et puella, verum est — I.64
et dives quis enim potest negare?
sed cum te nimium, Fabulla, laudas,
nec dives neque bella nec puella es.

"I know you're pretty, a lady and loaded,
Never seen in styles outmoded.
I can't deny I admire the wealth -
But a real lady wouldn't tell me herself!"

"That's Fabulla!" Seneca titters.

Quintilian does not smile. "You have captured her perfectly. But you realize, Martial, that's not poetry. It's nonsense. In Rome you must write on important topics. Create characters grander than life, heroes for young boys to imitate."

"He's right," Seneca says. "No one takes doggerel seriously."

"But do they buy it?" Martial asks.

"Definitely not. You entertain friends after dinner with such stuff. It will not earn your living. Furthermore, it is not art."

"Plenty of art goes into my work," Martial says, rising from the couch. "You can't appreciate it because you are pompous old fools."

"If you will not study the law..." Quintilian points to the door. "All you young men are alike, so sure of yourselves. I hope you starve."

On the way out, Martial casts longing looks at Quintilian's boxes of scrolls and comfortable couches - the luxurious rewards of being a humorless workaholic. Another poem already forms itself in his head.

Quintiliane, vagae moderator summe iuventae, II.90
gloria Romanae, Quintiliane, togae,
vivere quod propero pauper nec inutilis annis,
da veniam: properat vivere nemo satis.
differat hoc patrios optat qui vincere census
atriaque immodicis artat imaginibus.
me focus et nigros non indignantia fumos
tecta iuvant et fons vivus er herba rudis.
sit mihi verna sator, sit non dictissima coniunx,
sit nox cum somno, sit sine lite dies.

Quintilian, successful in Roman law,
The richest man I ever saw,
Do pardon me and my humble trade:
I don't make much; I serenade.
And yet it means I sleep enough
Though it's under a humble roof.
A harmless pauper let me be,
I shun the courts' intensity.

II. 65, Winter, Nero

Martial appears late at Quintilian's door. He has slept in, that being his best alternative to hunger and cold. He adjusts his toga.

The orator sits near a moveable fire, pen in hand.

"You summoned me. I am late." Martial says. "May I offer the usual excuses? What's for lunch?" He reclines at the table which holds a luscious display of olives, cheese and flat bread.

"Good afternoon, Marcus Valerius. You look as if you slept in your toga."

"I did."

"A shame, and you a Spaniard. Only think where you would be if you hadn't started off alienating me. And poor old Seneca."

"Yes, I heard about him. Dangerous place, Rome. Hung himself at the emperor's command, didn't he?" Martial helps himself to wine.

"Poison, actually," Quintilian says. "Now, you should offer to write for Nero. He loves poetry."

"And writes his own stuff. Terrible." Martial reaches for the bread. "So I think not. Work for the emperor, take poison. Though I do need a clean toga."

"This is serious, Marcus Valerius. What shall I say to the emperor?"

"Tell him no. Or no, thank you, if that seems better." The poet recites:

'Cur ergo' inquis 'habes malas lacernas?' VI.82.9-12[4]
Respondi 'quia sum malus poeta.'
Hoc ne saepius accidat poetae,
mittas, Rufe, mihi bonas lacernas.

"Why," Rufus asks, "is your toga frayed?"
"I'm a bad poet, that's why," I said.
Then added, "Rufus, prevent further decay.
Help me out, send a new one today."

Quintilian puts out his hand to stop Martial from finishing the cheese. "Indeed. I can see you will not drop epigram. If only you would write an epic, you could be set for life. Nero as a second Alexander. He would love it."

Martial yawns. "Sounds dull to me. Any more wine? Epics are too much work. And emperors fickle. There's poor Seneca, and look at what happened to Ovid! Why should I write an epic when I can sum up a loathsome character in two lines? Why pad it out to the thousands the way Vergil did?"

Quintilian frowns. "Aeneas is not a loathsome character. The epigrams

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4 Compare IX.48 and VIII.28

merely illustrate that you possess talent. They are not art. I will argue no longer. If only Rome would inspire you with something grand. You have talent, as I have said before."

Martial starts for the door. "Thanks for the grub."

"Wait." The orator leans over the couch and asks, "Tell me the end of, Nil recitas et vis, Mamerce, poeta videri (II.88)... 'You want me to think you're a poet, though you never read us your work...'?"

Quintillian seems to like little poems, so Martial obliges. "Quidquid vis esto, dummodo nil recitas, 'I'll call you whatever you want. Just don't read, that drives me berserk.' Mamercus is so annoying."

III.

Martial seems to have lived fifteen years in Rome without publishing any poetry. Whether it was to make his living, or to survive Roman politics of the late first century, by the time Nero went to his reward, Martial had changed his mind about working for the new emperors, Titus and Domitian. In 80, he published thirty-three poems in the Liber Spectaculorum, flattering the emperor at the opening of the Coliseum.[5] But long before the first book came out, old snobs and corner grocers alike could recite many of his lines. Martial's poetry got around so well without publishing that he could claim in the introduction to Book I (published in 86 AD) that he was already known world-wide.

Barbara pyramidum sileat miracula Memphis 0.1
Assyrius iactet nec Babylona labor;
nec Triviae templo molles laudentur Iones,
dissimulet Delon cornibus ara frequens;
aere nec vacuo pendentia Mausolea
laudibus inmodicis Cares in astra ferant.
omnis Caesareo cedit labor. Amphitheatro,
unum pro cunctis fama loquetur opus.

The old king's tomb at Halicarnassus
For a wonder scarcely passes.
Ionians swagger, then dispatch you
To ogle Artemis's crude statue.
Apollo's altar Delians cherish,

5 It's not clear whether Titus or Domitian opened the Coliseum. Because Martial refers only to "Caesar", he doesn't solve the mystery. References here to poems in the Liber Spectaculorum start with 0.

Though covered in horns, it's dull and squarish.
The pyramids, Egyptian's passion,
No longer rate; they're out of fashion.
Babylonians praise their trailing garden –
But garish taste we Romans pardon.
Who praises these a thorough dope is
After seeing Caesar's magnum opus.
All wonders yield to the amphitheater,
To the Coliseum and to its creator.

Quod pius et supplex elephas te, Caesar, adorat, 0.17
hic modo, qui tauro tam metuendus erat,
non facit hoc iussus, nulloque docente magistro,
crede mihi, nostrum sentit et ille deum.

The supple elephant bends his knee
To worship you spontaneously.
Without a whip, without a prod,
Believe me, Caesar, he knows you're god.

With poems like these, it's no wonder the emperor told all his friends to purchase the book. Enough people bought it to encourage our poet in his goal to write epigram. In the year 85, Martial cashed in on the holiday season of Saturnalia with two books of tag lines to accompany gifts. Topics ranged from praise of fava beans and exotic eggs to the delights of a live monkey and include: toothbrushes, articles of clothing, out-of-season vegetation, small items of furniture, notebooks, mini editions of Ovid, dice, the tail of an ox, soap, false teeth, old wine, tiny group statuettes:

Iste tibi faciet bona Saturnalia porcus, XIV.71
inter spumantes ilice pastus apros.

This little pig's deaf or not too swift.
He's part of a clay Saturnalia gift.
He gorged on acorns and fell asleep,
Though the wolves crouch by him, ready to leap.

Psittacus a vobis aliorum nomina discam: XIV.73
hoc didici per me dicere CAESAR HAVE.

A parrot with potential,
You should teach him something new.
He's just keeps repeating,
"Hail Caesar, how are you?"

Ut sapiant fatuae, farorum prandia, betae, XIII.13
o quam saepe petet vina piterque cocus!

Your cook will call for wine and pepper
To make these beets a decent supper.
Beets are wholesome, but oh so bland -
Breakfast of carpenters, you understand.

Dat festinatas, Caesar, tibi bruma coronas, XIII.127
quondam veris erat, nunc tua facta rosa est.

Hail to our Caesar who conquered time.
How he did it I'll tell you in rhyme.
The guest gift he chose is
A wreath full of roses
Which in winter only emperors can find.

Gaudet in effossis habitare cuniculus antris. XIII.60
monstravit tacitas hostibus ille vias.

Rabbits' habits make some sense,
They live in warrens, not in tents.
But this one gave his lair away.
Poor little hare, he's lunch today.

Sanguine de nostro tinctas, ingrate, lacernas XIII.87
induis et non est hoc satis: esca sumus.

Our purple's so very rich, it glows
  So you crush our shells to dye your clothes.
But that's not enough
  For a true shellfish buff—
You'll eat us, too. That's how it goes.

Rome inspired Martial, but not the way Quintilian expected. When our poet encountered Rome's least desirable denizens, he made fun of them in published verse. He turned his new city's idiosyncratic and/or disgusting characters into his life's work. Martial's poems were amusing and easy to remember and quote, fun lampoons. They sold well.

In the following twelve books he describes unscrupulous doctors (I.30, I.47, XI.28), sycophants anxious to dine out (IX.19), his neighbor in the next building (because he is close enough to touch, I.86), young men fishing for rich, ugly brides (I.10, XII.10), loquacious lawyers (I.79, VIII.7), thundering schoolteachers (I.97, IX.68. X.62), and fake-mongering antique dealers (VIII.6). The following examples depict the subjects of a nasty subgenre, the eternally unattractive.

'Thaida Quintus amat.' 'Quam Thaida?' 'Thaida luscam.' III.8
  Unum oculum Thais non habet, ille duos.

Quintus loves a girl. Which one?
  By one-eyed Thais his heart's undone.
One-eyed, then, she'll pledge her troth.
  Lucky girl, he's blind in both.

Thais habet nigros, niveos Laecania dentes. V.43
quae ratio est? Emptos haec habet, illa suos.

Lucy's teeth are pearly white
Thais has few, black as night.
The explanation, you demand?
Lucy bought hers at a stand.

Nubere vis Prisco: non miror, Paula, sapisti. IX.10
  ducere te non vult Priscus: et ille sapit.

Paula wants to marry Priscus
He's gorgeous; he can throw the discus.
Seems to me she's got good taste,
But all her hints have gone to waste.
Priscus doesn't want to wed her,
Seems to me his taste's much better.

Martial makes it seem as if he lived in poverty and was forced to be a client for subsistence. It's unlikely that this was true for long, if at all, but whether from experience or not, he described the client's duties in detail. That life was humiliating and inconvenient: getting up early (XIV.125), following patrons in their litters (X.10; III.46, IX.100, XI.24), swarming patrons in the street, claquing their speeches (II.27, XII.40), begging for dinner as a reward (II.27). He sums it up (XII.68): "The morning client's routine is why I left Rome."[6]

Si matutinos facilest tibi perdere somnos, XIV.125
attrita veniet sportula saepe toga.

If you don't mind losing your sleep
to get up and escort some creep,
Your toga will fray
and you'll waste the whole day -
It'll earn you a handout petite.

The toga was a villain. Though a symbol of ambition and negotium to others (X.30.27; XI.24), it symbolized burdens for Martial. He called the toga "urbanum iugum" (X.12.6), or credited it with all Rome's false courtesies ("togae... fatuae", X.19), and deplored "operam sine fine togatam" (III.46). He cherished the tunic, representative of place where the *quies* was *tunicata* and the toga *ignota* (X.51.6, also at XII.18.17). In a tunic he could enjoy *otium*, the kind of artistic leisure which nurtured Horace and Vergil (I.107). A synthesis, the hodgepodge dress of Saturnalia, freed the wearer from the toga and its duties (XIV.142).

Life is better in the country (X.96.11-12), since, quattuor hic aestate togae pluresve teruntur, autumnis ibi me quattuor una tegit: "I wear out four or more togas a season in Rome, but out here in the *rus*, one lasts me four years."[7]

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6 See also II.48.

7 Compare I.49.31, *nusquam toga*, and X.19, where he claims the toga is a waste of time.

IV. 87, Under Domitian

As the years go by, Martial keeps in touch with Quintilian by sending him poems and books. Quintilian, eventually charmed by Martial's wit, softens toward the writer of epigram. After reading his fellow Spaniard's third book, he invites him to dine.

"But why don't you wear your best toga to lunch with me?"

"This is it."

"Don't you make enough money from your books to get a finer one?"

"Quintilian, old man, I'm starved," Martial confesses. "Let's start on the meal and I'll tell you the truth about being a poet in Rome."

Quintilian gestures toward the couches. Martial reclines and takes an appreciative sip of wine.

"The books actually bring little income. Amateurs plagiarize and the booksellers steal.[8] True, they pay me for copying a book once, but then they set their slaves to mass reproduction."

"But don't you get gifts from admirers? Invitations to dinner, vacations in the country? You've gotten a nice tax-break."

"The dinners can be tedious. And skimpy, as I have said a thousand times."

cur sine te ceno tecum, Pontice, cenam — III.60.9-10
sportula quod non est prosit: examus idem.

Ponticus, thanks for the meal.
Thanks, though the scene was surreal.
I came to your dinner
But left so much thinner
Next time I'll ask, "What's the appeal?"

Quintilian laughs. "Or at the beginning of the book, where you say

Romam petebat esuritor Tuccius — III.14
profectus ex Hispania.
occurit illi sportularum fabula:
a ponte rediit Mulvio.
A poet once starving in Spain
Came to Rome to start over again.
But crossing the Tiber, he met a survivor

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8 II.20; I.29, I.38, I.52, I.53, I.63, I.91 and I.113

Who said, "A poet? You'll dine on distain."

"Yes," Martial sighs. "What benefit is fame? My wallet doesn't feel any benefit.[9] I court patrons because I'm hungry; they love my poems. It's an arrangement I regret the next morning. Here's one I'm working on about how rough life is:[10]

Prima salutantes atque altera conterit hora IV.8.1-4
exercet raucos tertia causidicos,
in quintam varios extendit Roma labores,

When called, greet your patron at six.
At eight, attend lawyers prolix.
'Round ten walk with them on the street.
At twelve, take a short break to eat.

You see, old friend, being patrons, they expect me to act like a client. I hate that."

"I know." Quintilian pats Martial's arm. "You can't endure *vanae taedia togae*, the boring tasks which require a toga." (III.4.5)

"Ah, you remember that one. It's true. All I really want is time to write."[11]

V. 89, Still Domitian

Martial unrolls a small scroll from Quintilian, who has retired to Spain.

"Dearest Marcus Valerius, hope you are well, etc. Your eighth book has made its way to me here. I read it eagerly. I laughed aloud at your portrait of my former eye doctor. (VIII.74 - You're good with that little dagger in gladiatorial fights, probably because you got so much practice as an eye doctor.) Elegant chiasmus to show his crossed eyes. The subtle praise in *Regia pyramidum* (VIII.36) made me weep. You have come far from the 'the old king's tomb...' When I think of what you could have been if you had tried serious poetry! Say hello to Rome for me, and come home soon."

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9 XI.3.6

10 more, similar at III.36, V.22, X.5, X.56, X.82, XI.24 (Martial asks patron to give him some time off)

11 Martial did have a sincere side. For instance, memorials for the dead (e.g. I.88, V.34), and addressing his books to make the trip to a designated recipient, often far away (I.52, I.108, I.117, II. *Sal.*, II.6, III.2, III.4, IV.10, IX.99, X.20, X.104, XI.1). I.70 "Go make my greeting for me, little book. Today I send you to the handsome house of Proculus. You ask me the way and I'll tell you. First, pass the local temple to Castor, the young ladies' institution by Venus," etc.

"Good old Quintilian," Martial says to himself. "I can picture him lounging in his garden. I ought to retire myself one of these years." He picks up his pen and writes, "Marcus Valerius Martialis salutes Quintilian. I am working on the next book. Your letter puts me in mind of home. I do what I have to here, tangled in the city's chains. If you find me a quiet place to settle, I will return. Here's a recent trifle."

Matutine cliens, urbis mihi causa relictae, XII.68
atria, si sapias, ambitiosa colas.
non sum ego causidicus nec amaris litibus aptus
sed piger et senior Pieridumque comes;
otia me somnus iuvant, quae magna negavit
Roma mihi: redeo, si vigilatur et hic.

A good Roman client's up early
to attend at the halls of the great.
There, that's it in a nutshell,
that's all about Rome that I hate.
I'm an old, lazy pal of the Muses,
and think leisure more vital than cash.
But when I can't sleep in the country,
I'm off, back to Rome in a flash."

VI.

Martial did receive a gift of land and a house in his native Bilbilis for retirement, but not from Quintilian. He published three more books before he left Rome. Though he had written many poems on the simple country life before (e.g. I.49, I.61), Book X, published in 96, contains a flock of them. In X.58, Martial complains that Rome wears a man down; city people are too noisy in X.62. He begs Rome to go easy on her clients; he's desperate for a rest (X.74) and needs the country life (X.96).[12] It seems as if he were beginning to think about retirement. Rome, as fascinating a source of satire as she was, also fatigued him. Many interpret the following poem as referring to a woman, but
perhaps Rome was Martial's favorite mistress:

Difficilis facilis, iucundus acerbus es idem: XII.47
nec tecum possum vivere nec sine te.

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12 More heartfelt musings on the simple life in Spain in Book XII: 29, 57 and 68.

First we're in then we're out,
  First you fawn, then you pout.
I know I love you and then I doubt,
  I can't live with you, I can't live without.

VII. 98, Under Nerva

Imagine a bright spring day in Spain, the kind of day when it seems as if all your dreams have come true. Martial climbs a hill towards his own farm, eager to enjoy the rewards of fame, the simple life at home. No crowded market boasting world-traveling delicacies, no floods of clients jostling the hoi polloi out of the way. Just a hearth of his own and a few faithful servants.

Little in the town has changed. In his house he finds the old woman Ligeia, who served him as a child. Happy to see her, Martial recites:

Toto vertice quot gerit capillos XII.7
  annos si tot habet Ligeia, trima est.

"If this Ligeia is as old as
  The number of hairs her head has,
Why then she'd be, let's see, about three!"

She staggers to her feet and hugs him. "My Marcus Valerius has returned at last. You never could resist a poem, could you?"

And a good thing, too. By the time Martial retired he had completed an epic, a priceless portrait of Rome. He died in Bilbilis about 103 AD. Though he didn't follow a single hero, as did Vergil, or relate fabulous stories, as did Ovid, he preserved enough odd incidents and true-to-life characters to paint a lasting backdrop for the history of his times. Martial's 1555 small poems, the product of an indefatigable voyeur, bring the city to life for us. Without Martial, how would we know that the Romans used false teeth, dyed their hair, gave each other talking parrots, and brushed away their table crumbs with ox tails?

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